

CIA Is Bugged by Hints of Reform

By DAVID WISE

The resignation of Adm. Bobby Ray Inman as the No. 2 man at the Central Intelligence Agency may serve a useful purpose if it revives the debate over controlling the agency.

The very existence of the CIA, the FBI and other intelligence arms poses a continuing dilemma for all Americans: whether secret intelligence machinery can ever be made compatible with democratic government. These agencies perform vital tasks but are so powerful that they also pose a threat to the constitutional liberties they were created to protect.

At the very least, the departure of the widely respected Inman should alert us to the fact that all is not well "out in the woods," as CIA agents sometimes refer to their headquarters across the Potomac in pastoral Langley, Va.

A year ago, when a draft of a new presidential order on intelligence leaked to the press, Inman told the Senate Intelligence Committee that he did not favor changes that would permit the agency to conduct covert operations in the United States or to spy on Americans at home. "The job of the CIA is abroad," he said. He told the press that he might resign if "repugnant changes" were adopted.

Last December, President Reagan signed the new order, and sure enough, for the first time in history, it permitted the agency to conduct covert operations in this country and to spy on Americans at home. Inman had lost. Former CIA director Stansfield Turner, who is not known as a far-out radical, warned that the Reagan order would permit unwarranted "intrusion into the lives of Americans."

Even before Reagan signed the executive order, the White House had made it clear in a leak to the press that if the controversial William J. Casey stepped down as CIA director, Inman would not be named to replace him. (Presidents complain only about unauthorized leaks to the press.) Blocked off from the top job, frustrated by a series of bureaucratic battles, including the fight over the executive order and over a more recent plan to create a new agency for counterintelligence, it was not surprising that Inman—having already threatened to quit—would accept a six-figure offer from the private sector. He will now be free to speak out from the sidelines, and may hope to become CIA director some day.

Perhaps his resignation will help to puncture the myth that has grown up around the agency in recent years. During the 1970s, in the wake of Watergate, the press and congressional investigations disclosed a series of incredible abuses and illegal acts by the intelligence agencies. It was revealed that

the CIA, using Mafia hitmen, had plotted the assassination of foreign leaders, tested drugs such as LSD on unsuspecting American citizens, routinely opened first-class mail in violation of the law, read cables and spied on Vietnam War protesters (sometimes even using spy satellites in outer space to photograph demonstrators).

Following these disclosures, so the myth goes, there was a series of legislative reforms and presidential orders that seriously hobbled the intelligence agencies, including the CIA. So now it is time to "unleash" the CIA and the other agencies and remove the restrictions that are endangering our security.

The only trouble with this perception is that it is not true. No legislation was passed to reform the agencies by creating charters to restrict and define their authority. Bills to do that were introduced in 1978 and 1980, but they did not pass. President Jimmy Carter did issue an executive order advising the CIA not to go around assassinating people.

Congress, it is also true, did pass a law in 1978 requiring court warrants for most bugs and wiretaps. And in 1980, Congress enacted another law declaring that it was entitled to information about the intelligence agencies, including advance notice of most covert operations. But the same legislation reduced from eight to two the number of committees to which the CIA must report, a change the agency wanted. Such was the extent of "intelligence reform."

The pendulum in fact has swung very far in the favor of the intelligence agencies. Aside from Reagan's "Big Brother" executive order, both houses of Congress have passed a bill that would jail reporters who disclose information that reveals the "identities" of intelligence agents, broad-brush legislation that, had it existed in 1972, might have prevented the press from reporting that most of the Watergate burglars had CIA backgrounds, and that one was on the agency's payroll at the time of the break-in. In addition, the agency is pushing for a law to exempt it completely from the Freedom of Information Act.

There was one beneficial result from the intelligence scandals of the mid-1970s. The Senate and House created permanent committees on intelligence and, along with the press, they offer the public the best hope for monitoring the CIA.

Congress is in no mood, however, at least while President Reagan is in office, to consider broad reform legislation for the intelligence agencies. If undertaken at all, that task will not be accomplished until after 1984. But of course, if George Orwell is right, by that time it will be too late.

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